

LIMERICK SOCIALIST

THE
VOICE
OF THE
WORKER

February, 1974.

6p

Vol. 3. No. 2.

"That which is good for the working class I esteem patriotic . . ." James Connolly



The Life and Letters of Feathery Bourke

"You've got a little Something
the Others hav'nt Got."

Demo. from

L. Bourke & Sons,

Hide, Skin, Feather and Metal Merchants,
40 HIGH STREET,

LIMERICK.

CURLED HAIR,
HORSE HAIR,
BRASS, LEAD,
COPPER, ZINC,

To



TALKING SHOP



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ECHOES FROM

- THE -

BOTTOM DOG

"We must look at life in all its aspects from the point of view of the "Bottom Dog"—the oppressed—be it nation, class, or sex."

NO. 29. 4th MAY, 1918 PRICE ½d.

LABOUR DAY

Sunday next will be Labour Day in Limerick. A Procession composed of all Trade Union bodies and bands will parade at 3.00 p.m., and afterwards in the Markets Field the concourse will be addressed from three platforms by prominent speakers. In these trying times one thing manifests itself. Labour is finding its feet in Ireland. Its strength and power are being realised more and more every day. Tuesday week proved beyond yea or nay that united and organised it can carry the day. Let Labour Day be another telling manifestation in Limerick that Labour has taken its place in public life and means to "make good". A lot of ills B.D.'s suffer from can be remedied by B.D. themselves if they only to themselves are true. In the face of threatened danger the ranks are closed up. May they remain so, not until the danger is passed but forever afterwards to fight and defeat the other foes round about us.

SAIN PÉTER

We see by a report of a meeting of the Limerick Branch, Irish Asylum Workers Union that Dr. Peter Irwin is pursuing obstructionist methods regarding the Asylum staff. There is an old established custom that when a relative of any of the staff is dead, representatives from the staff are granted leave to attend the funeral. This custom dates back to times less democratic than the present year A.D. But Dr. Irwin is out to knock it on the head, and actually refused permission twice in one week when a member of the staff lost his mother and a son. The Committee of Management recently brought Dr. Irwin to book for lowering his profession by becoming a forcible feeder, and we are sure they

will see that justice is done now and that the attendants, who have to be on duty from 90 to 100 hours a week, are not to be treated worse than blacks in this land where men kneel down and pray.

CONSCRIPTION — IS A SOLUTION POSSIBLE?

The only possible answer to this question has already been emphatically given by B.D.'s. We will not have Conscription in any form, from any government, but evidently this has not yet been grasped even by so-called Labour Leaders in England, and the Right Hon. J.H. Thomas, M.P., the General Secretary, N.U.R., came over to Dublin last Sunday to do what his "Rimmer" machine failed to do a week previous — throw dust in the eyes of Irish Railway workers. But J.H. Thomas went back to his Capitalist Government, whose tool he is, a sadder if not a wiser man. Knowing how easily Leaders of his own party had been bought over, and how English workers too had been fooled with talk of fighting for Liberty, supplemented by high wages (with which by the way, they are unable to get sufficient food) he probably thought that Conscription, if sufficiently sugar coated with, say, exemption for some Railway men, and a "Government of Ireland Act" would be swallowed by Irish Labour, but he was not allowed to remain long under that impression. Any man, after three and a half years war, who begins to talk in Ireland about the violation of Belgian authority and the rights of small Nationalities must either take us for a pack of ignorant fools or think we have been living up in the Moon. The delegate who said "whoever wins, we lose as workers" showed that B.D.'s are thinking. But do not let us delude ourselves into believing that the fight is all over. If military preparations count for anything there is a lot of work to be done yet, but there is no need to be down-hearted. Our cause is just. And with united action, backed up by individual conviction, we need have no fear for the result.

THE BUTCHER'S BOY AND THE COPYBOOK PROFITS

A regular feature in the "Limerick Chronicle", in its weekend edition, is its "Limerickman's Diary" page. The page is invariably made up of a collection of uncritical articles on a variety of topics. Side by side with features on sporting clubs, one finds "puffs" for business companies opening new offices, or introducing new products to Limerick. The page

is further padded out with free publicity pieces on operatic, theatrical and musical groups, sandwiched between articles on An Taisce outings, Georgian houses and historical society meetings. A few photos of groups at dinner dances, business openings or sporting re-unions round off the mixture.

A typical piece in this pious potpourri appeared in the Chronicle edition of January 19th. The article, headed, Big prize for sales executive with Rank Xerox, stated:

Pat Webb's outstanding ability as a salesman and, indirectly, his belief in the future of the mid-Western Region, have won him one of the most coveted awards in the sales field — an all-expenses-paid holiday in the Caribbean. This week Pat and his wife, Patricia, flew to Barbados, West Indies, where they will holiday for two weeks in the plush Holiday Inn. Pat was made the award by his company, Rank Xerox, for his performance during 1972-'73 in the Mid-West Region. He is the only sales representative of the company in Ireland to be so honoured for some years, and his record puts him in the top bracket with the company's foremost salesmen in the intensive business areas of England, Scotland and Wales.

The article concluded in the usual fashion by giving some details of Webb's sporting background and his family's victualling business. Naturally enough in this context, no attempt was made to probe the profits made by Rank Xerox from Webb's award-winning sales performance, or to document the over-all profits of this company. But some of these facts are easily obtainable, even by Chronicle reporters. A week previously, the New Statesman, in its edition of January 11th, published a revealing article on the Rank Organisation by Nicolas Adam. In the course of the article Adam stated:

.. in 1972 the Rank Organisation made a post-tax profit of £25,728,000, an increase of some £7½ m. on the previous year; a similar increase may be expected this year. The reason for this can be summed up in two words: Rank Xerox .. By 1961 Rank Xerox was manufacturing the then standard copier, the 914, in England; as each new product appeared from the States, Rank Xerox manufactured it and distributed it throughout the world, initially in Europe, eventually as far afield as China and Japan .. This, then, is where Rank's money comes from. No less than 80 per cent of the Rank Organisation's profits derive from Rank Xerox. In 1972 Rank Xerox Ltd., earned £109,397,000 for the Rank Organisation.

With this kind of money the cost of Pat Webb's holiday in Barbados is like a drop of water in the Caribbean Sea. From the £20½ million profits made in 1972, Rank Xerox could afford to send the entire population of Limerick on a Caribbean holiday and still have enough loose change left over to buy out the Limerick Leader and Chronicle newspapers.

Commenting on his achievement the former butcher's boy, Webb, modestly declared: "This award is an endorsement of the future of the Mid-West Region". The award, of course, has nothing whatever to do with the Mid-West or any other region. It is merely an endorsement of the huge profits made by Rank Xerox in the Mid-West and throughout its entire empire.

But was the wrong man sent to Barbados? Webb's efforts are puny when contrasted with the drudgery of Limerickman over all those years in having to fill his weekly Diary with the dreary trivia of Limerick life. The liberation of an all-expenses-paid holiday, amid the gently swaying palm-trees and luscious, dusky dolly-girls, under the sultry Caribbean skies, could be just the right tonic to put a little zip into the writing of the jaded Limerickman. But then, alas, this dream is as far removed from reality as the Diary itself is removed from the realities of the average Limerick worker's life.

Worker's Notebook

DOWN MEMORY LANE

The relationship between the weekend editions of the "Limerick Leader" and "Limerick Chronicle" newspapers is something like the relationship between a wealthy, over-fed step-mother and a poor, under-nourished waif. The "Leader" continues to be bloated with advertising fodder and with the boring long-winded contributions of its "outside" writers. The Saturday "Chronicle", on the other hand, invariably gives the impression of being starved of real news and of being hastily put together with left-over articles, supplied scripts, "fillers" and odds and ends of all sorts.

For all its limitations, however, the Chronicle often rewards its relatively small readership with unexpected nuggets of information. The setting for such items is usually provided by the paper's page two feature, Down Memory Lane. The selection of political, religious, social and sporting echoes from past decades occasionally throws up interesting sidelights on local history and personalities, as two recent extracts show.

The first paragraph in the 10 Years Ago section stated:

Mr. Tom O'Donnell, T.D., was in touch with the Department of Transport and Power about rumours that U.S. jet planes were likely to get permission to fly into Dublin. Mr. Childers described the rumours as "poppycock".

Ah, yes! A decade is a long, long time in politics. And Tom O'Donnell is not to be heard asking too many questions about Shannon Airport these days.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Another interesting paragraph appeared in the "Chronicle" in its edition of December 29th last year. In the "30 Years Ago" "Memory" section the paper reported:

At a public meeting in Limerick, presided over by the Mayor, Mr. James McQuane, and attended by representatives of the different organisations, Rev. Dr. Cowper, Adm. St. Michael's, said that 1,400 children in the city were not able to attend school regularly owing to the fact that they had neither clothes nor boots, and that 400 others were attending school even though they did not have boots.

The forties was a time of unprecedented religious fervour in Limerick. The weekly attendance at the Confraternity meetings was soaring to new heights, while, down the road, the past pupils of the Jesuits were as diligent as ever in going about their religious duties.

And, while working people struggled to survive in

the midst of the squalor and poverty, the traditional merchant families, the familiar members of the medical and legal professions, the two local bishops and their small army of clergymen continued to live in pleasant profusion in their fashionable houses in Corbally and the Ennis Road. But, then, what chance had the Christian cries of Suffer Little Children To Come Unto Me and Love Thy Neighbour As Thy Self of ever penetrating the Limerick bourgeois-belt?

THE BARD AND HIS PUBLISHERS

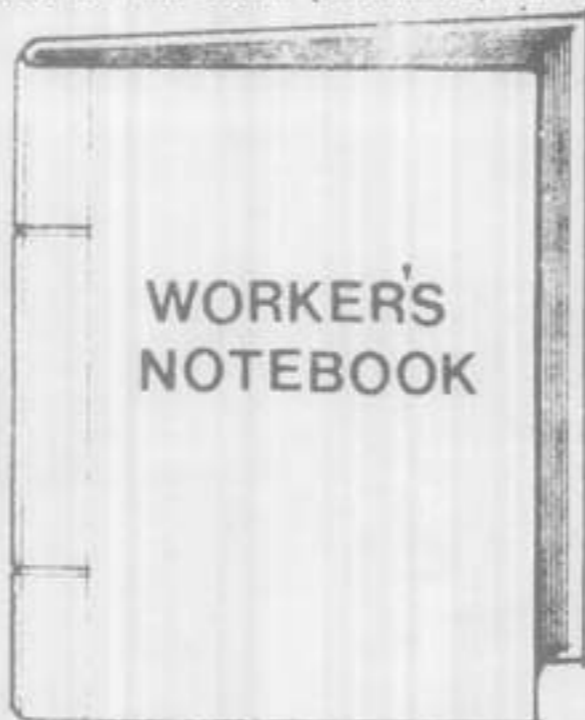
Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, was not well served by publishers in his lifetime. In his introduction to his book "Lays and Legends Of Thomond", he wrote:

Twelve years ago I made my first advance in the market of letters and was remorselessly fleeced by a Printer's devil .. The first edition of these Poems, which appeared in 1867, would have been a great success were it not for the shameless and faithless conduct of the publisher, who promised to have the book ready in three months, but it was two years before I could get it out of his hands, and then only in unbound sheets .. Some time previous I made another venture in Dublin, and fared worse, for although I have the publisher's memoranda for 7,000 copies printed and published yet I never received anything more substantial than the memoranda.

Three-quarters of a century after his death, the Bard has once again been badly treated by his latest publishers. In December, Fercor Press, a subsidiary of the Mercier Press, reprinted the first part of Lays And Legends Of Thomond as the first book of a three-part series.

The book is a skimpy production; it is badly laid out and printed, and it makes no attempt to explain or analyse the Bard's poetry. At 95p, the book is poor value and a price of half this sum could be considered a more reasonable figure. And, instead of reprinting the entire Lays And Legends in three new books, a representative selection from the original book would have been a better proposal. (Some of the Bard's poems are only of curiosity value today and do not merit publication in a "popular" paperback).

By the crude manner in which he has approached the Bard and his work, Sean Feehan, the man responsible for the recent publication, has shown



little sympathy with this unique Limerick writer. The great pity about the whole venture is that Hogan himself is not around to lampoon the "Get-rich-quick" Feehan and his shoddy publication.

THE BATTLE OF MURROE

Church gate collections are a normal feature of Irish life. On most Sundays of the year, collection tables, guarded by a variety of people from religious, political and sporting bodies, are to be seen outside Irish Catholic churches. (The fact that Protestant churches are exempted from this custom tells much about the respective attitudes of the collecting bodies and the Protestants).

Bodies wishing to hold church-gate collections must apply to the nearest police superintendent for the necessary authorisation. Permission being granted, a suitable date is agreed upon and the collection is allowed to proceed.

A departure from this well-defined practice took place at Murroe, Co. Limerick, on Sunday the 21st of last October. The Labour deputy for East Limerick, Alderman Steve Coughlan, arrived at the village and, assisted by a group of his local henchmen, started to take up collections at the two morning masses.

After some time, Sergeant Hannon, of Cappamore Garda Station, arrived on the scene and informed Coughlan that as no authorisation had been granted, the collection was, therefore, illegal. The sergeant further told Coughlan that it was his duty to confiscate the money collected. A short struggle developed, during which the sergeant's cap became dislodged, but Hannon succeeded in seizing the £3 on the collection table.

At this stage, Coughlan backed off, but as a parting shot he informed the sergeant that he would be hearing further about the matter. For once, Coughlan was as good as his word. He left Murroe and immediately set about reversing the situation. Soon the Coalition wheels were put in motion, and the telephone line between William Street Garda Station and Cappamore began buzzing. Despite his prompt action in enforcing the law, Sgt. Hannon quickly found himself sitting on a hot seat. The sharp realisation of serving under a Coalition Government was forcibly brought home to him, and he was "prevailed" on to reconsider his action.

A few days afterwards the chastened Hannon was ignominiously forced to hand back the confiscated money. And, to add insult to the injury, Coughlan went a step further. Despite the fact that the G.A.A. had "booked" the following Sunday (October 28th) for its annual church-gate collection at Murroe, this was hurriedly postponed, and Coughlan returned in triumph to take up his second collection. And Sergeant Hannon stayed away, thoughtfully licking his wounds and wondering about the "open Government" practised by the Coalition parties.

But Coughlan's success at Murroe is not surprising. He has long been a "favourite son" of the local police establishment, and he is regularly to be seen in press photographs hob-nobbing with the force's top brass at Garda dinner-dances.

Over the years Coughlan has proved his worth to the police. As a result of his activity in the community, he has served as a useful "listening-post" for the senior Garda officers in Limerick. And, on a wider level, his political gimmickry has succeeded in confusing workers about the real nature of political life under capitalism. Coughlan's efforts in supporting the status quo have helped to prevent the emergence of a strong working class movement equipped to confront the forces of capitalism on all fronts.

Viewing the Murroe incident against this background, it was therefore inevitable that Coughlan should have succeeded in easily out-manoeuvring Sergeant Hannon. After all, sergeants are expendable but there is only one fake "Labour" deputy in East Limerick.

PART ONE

The Life and Letters of Feathery Bourke

"Ah, my dear children, why do you look at me like this?"

Euripides; *Medea*

In September last year the well-known and wealthy Limerick feather merchant and scrap metal dealer, Mikey "Feathery" Bourke, died. For over sixty years Feathery had been a familiar figure to successive generations of Limerick people as he carried out his business in High Street and Cornmarket Row. He was born on June 6th, 1895, one of a family of four brothers and two sisters. His mother, Lil Bourke, had worked hard in building up the business and, in due course, she passed it on to Feathery, with all her money and property.

Some of Feathery's nephews have become even more widely known than their unique uncle. Sean Bourke, a son of Feathery's brother, Frank, gained world-wide publicity for his efforts in the escape of the spy, George Blake. Bourke is now recognised as an accomplished writer and his book *The Springing of George Blake*, has become a best-seller in many countries. Another nephew, Desmond O'Grady, a son of Feathery's sister, Annie, has been hailed as one of the best of the young Irish poets and his poetry has been published in six slim volumes. Yet another nephew, Michael P. (Sean) Finnan, a son of Feathery's eldest sister, is a well-known local trade unionist and is president of the Limerick Branch of the National Engineering and Electrical Trade Union. He is also a former president of the Limerick Council of Trade Unions.

With an uncle such as Feathery, it was natural for the two writers, Bourke and O'Grady, to turn their writing pens in his direction. Sean Bourke, who, over a year before, had written an affectionate and memorable tribute to another Limerick character, "Gurky" McMahon, was stirred by Feathery's death into writing his uncle's obituary. Unlike the vast majority of the pious, hypocritical and cliché-ridden eulogies that pass for obituaries in the local press, Bourke attempted to tell the story "like it was". The obituary, published in the *Limerick Leader* and *Limerick Weekly Echo* on September 15th, described how Feathery had acquired his wealth:

In due course the others all fled the nest in the natural way of things, but Feathery stayed behind with his mother and became the natural choice to inherit her extensive property, her money, and the scrap business which was to become the centre of his life for more than sixty years, and which gave him his nickname that he was to take to the grave with him. He was a wealthy man, having made his pile, like so many other scrap dealers, in the time of the war. At one time he would have bought anything that was resaleable at even a penny profit from a rabbit skin to an old steam engine; from a jam-jar to a bundle of rags - having first thoroughly searched the rags to ensure that they were not weighed down with rocks.

In his poem, *Memories Of An Influential Uncle*, published in Spring 1968, Desmond O'Grady is even more forthright in his poetic efforts to capture his childhood impressions of his "influential uncle".

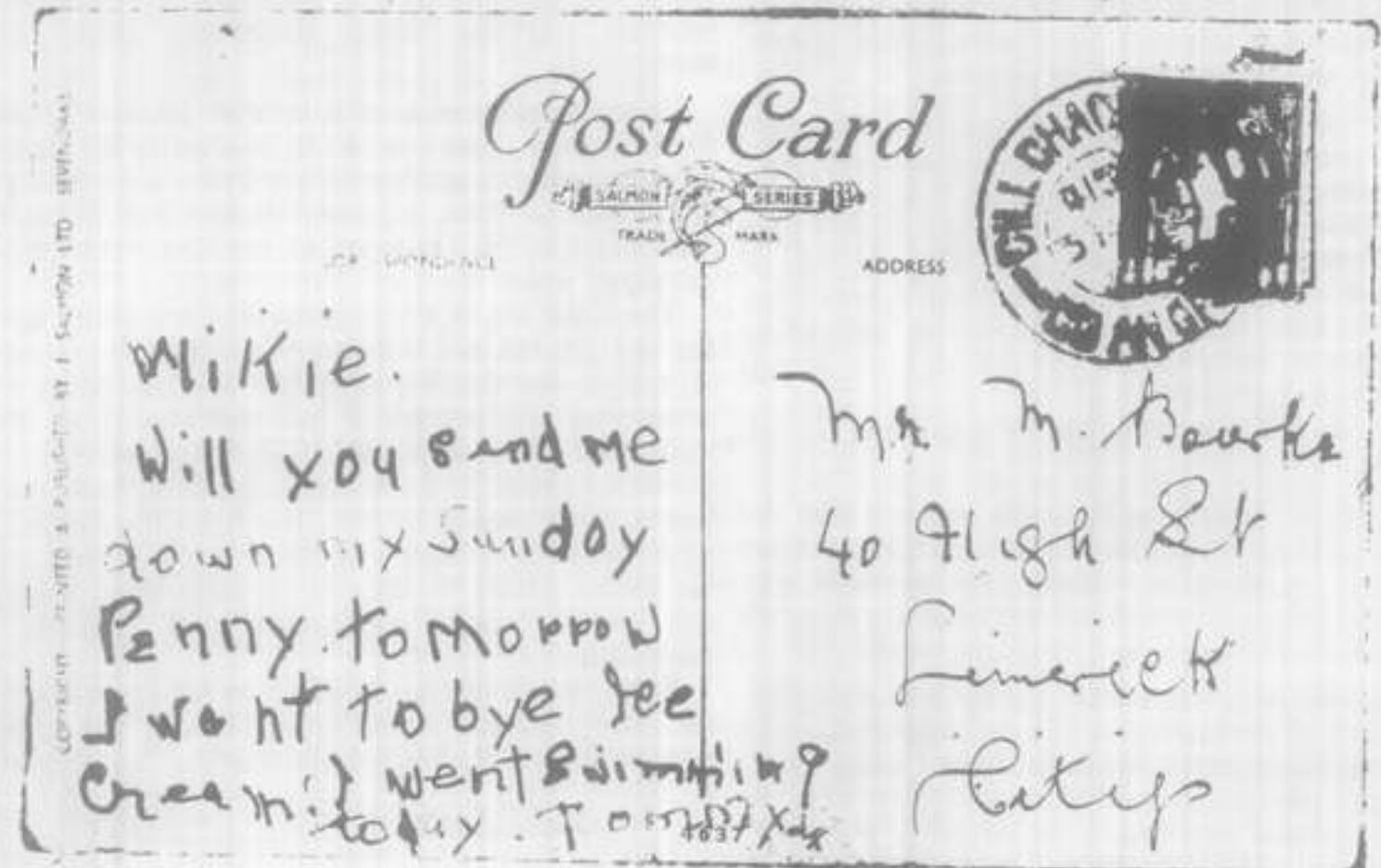
In a crow black suit you'd confuse for a beggar's, grey hair combed straight across his head, he stands in the door of his condemned house, bronzed fists in his coat pockets, spit grey eyes no brighter, no bigger than nailheads. In his forehead a small deep dent from a shaft of a backing cart when a child,

Away over the rooftops and pigeon-coops, the spire of St. John's Cathedral. Straight in front, his slum inheritance - his mother's empire. Over his head the three floors of the old house that bred the lot of them, still furnished, its harm done. Forty years of dust on the sheet covered forms. Up in the rat looted-attic, black sea trunks still standing half open, packed with the wardrobe he wore on those Indian cruises after his mother's death and her will. Not a penny has seen the daylight since. He remained alone: his position with contemporaries always the blind side of form, playing rare and wise in his silences - a kind of hostility. He was tight with money, superstitious, secretive, cold as a herring when driving a bargain, honest as salt. He feared his God, but distrusted his clergy. He returned unchanged from his cruises and never again went anywhere.

any sign that might lead to it; frequently warning individualistic action from pride could only end badly - and cited relations.

One of Feathery's first jobs after leaving school was at the Theatre Royal, where he worked as a ticket-collector in the "gods" section of the theatre. His father showed no interest in building up the family business and gradually Feathery became more and more absorbed in helping his mother. Feathery joined her on a full-time basis in running the business. Both worked very hard, frequently labouring around-the-clock loading and unloading scrap and feathers and skinning horses and cattle. Feathery showed a natural aptitude for this work and quickly became expert in all aspects of the trade.

During the periods of Lent, Feathery and his mother diversified their operations. "Black" fasting



Postcard sent by Tommy O'Grady to his uncle, Feathery Bourke, from Kilkee, on August 31st, 1940.

But for me as a child, in that long toyleless night of the War, his presence was brightly homeric. While Hitler's huns converged on the Channel and Goering came nightly to hammer down Coventry, I sat by the fire while he told me of other times and their heroes: the mad Black and Tans or Cuchulainn, O'Neill, Dan O'Connell, or Nial of the Nine Hostages, the Children of Lir or the Wooing of Emer, the Salmon of Knowledge or the Story of Deirdre, the coming of Patrick, the Three Sons of Uisneach, the Return of Ossian or Death of Cuchulainn, the Danes and the Normans, Hogan the Poet of Thomond or the ballad of The Blacksmith of Limerick, the Civil War that divided the family, my grandfather's plunge to ruin and death from his drinking, my grandmother's curse on his sons' children. He distrusted success and any characteristic trait of a questionable ancestor. His greatest hate was proud independence in youth, or

was the order of the day at this time and the Bourkes began trading in salted herrings. The herrings were placed in brine in five or six barrels and sold outside the store at Cornmarket Row. At Easter what herrings remained unsold were eaten by Feathery and his mother.

In the early nineteen-twenties the Black and Tans set fire to three houses owned by the Bourkes in Cornmarket Row. During the fire Feathery's mother, Lil, rushed into the burning buildings and later emerged tightly clutching two pillow-cases stuffed with money. It was during this period also that Feathery pulled off one of his biggest business coups. The Strand Barracks had served as a base for the British military forces, and during the Civil War it had been occupied by republican forces. After this war, the Barracks was put on the market for sale, and, despite intimidation at gunpoint by local nationalist forces, Feathery attended the sale and-

bought the property for a proverbial "song". He later sold the Barracks to the Limerick Corporation at a big profit.

In 1932 Fianna Fail came to power and the "Economic War" with Britain began shortly afterwards. Feathery did not approve of this "war" and feared for his own and the Irish Government's currency. It is well known that "businessmen make poor revolutionaries" and Feathery was no exception to this rule. He had no intention of going down with the "wrap-the-green-flag-round-me-boys" and took steps to ensure his economic survival if the worst went to the worst. In 1933 he exchanged £2,205 in Irish currency for English currency at the Westminster Bank in London, and locked the money away in his own private safe for the threatened rainy day.

Despite the economic recession, Feathery kept going, and, after his mother's death, he redoubled his money-making activities. This overwork brought on a bout of illness, and, on doctor's orders, he was forced to take a rest. Faced, for the first time in his life with the prospect of taking a holiday, Feathery braved the daunting task of venturing alone into the big, unknown world. A sea cruise was suggested as the best means of convalescence, and Feathery agreed to make the necessary arrangements for a trial trip.

On My 3rd, 1937, he wrote to the International Travel Bureau, 19 Commercial Buildings, Dublin, and for £3.2.6d booked a place on a "grand" tour of Scotland, leaving Dublin by steamer on May 15th and returning on Tuesday morning, May 18th. Despite the relatively modest cost involved, Feathery was determined to get the best possible value for money by travelling in the third-class section. In his letter of May 3rd he informed the Bureau of this intention. On May 5th the Bureau promptly replied:

We have reserved a place for you on the above Tour as requested, but with regard to the berths we wish to point out that on Scotch boats there is very little sleeping accommodation, the berths only being available for those travelling saloon, and for that reason most of the party prefer to travel that way as it is very much more comfortable. However, if you decide to travel 3rd as already stated, we will make that reservation for you and we will refund you the 5/- when we meet you on board.

Feathery got the message and sent on a further 10/- to secure a first-class berth. However, second thoughts crowded in and he changed his mind about the excursion. He again wrote to the Bureau and got a refund of his payments.

When Feathery eventually managed to get away on a sea cruise his maiden voyage was not a success. He travelled in his work-a-day clothes and, dressed in a cloth cap and an old, shabby suit, the out-of-place dealer spent a lot of his time in the confinement in his ship's berth. Despite this set-back, however, he persevered and arranged to go on another trip on the T.S.S. Tuscania from 26th June to 9th July, 1937. On this occasion his brother-in-law Leonard O'Grady had him rigged out in new shirts, hat, blazer and white trousers, and, for the first time in his life, Feathery travelled in style.

During this cruise he visited many places, including Madeira, Lisbon and Gibraltar. The holidays seems to have had a good effect on his health and his humour. On his return to Limerick he tried to trace the address of one of his fellow-passengers. It is obvious from the playful tone of one of his letters to a table companion that he greatly enjoyed himself and that he found the company of a Miss Woods particularly interesting. The letter, dated July 13th, stated:

I am sure you will be surprised at receiving this note from that bold, bad man on the Tuscania who

made several attempts to get away with your purse and failed badly. I would like you to remember it was all in fun, without any serious intentions, and I am sure you looked on it in the same way. Both yourself and your husband were the life of the table and we all enjoyed your company to such an extent that I myself found it hard to part. I trust you arrived home safe and sound and your husband likewise, and that we shall meet again, if not in this Earth, with God's help in Heaven. I wonder would you have Miss Woods' address in London, as I did not get it from her before we parted in Dublin, and, as you know, I would like to drop her a line. I herewith enclose addressed envelope of the address I will be at on the 24th of July, as on that date I will be going up north on the St. Louis. Trusting you will oblige.

Back in Limerick, Feathery's good humour appears to have lasted for a short time. His new mood even brought on some philosophical thoughts on the benefits of good health and contentment. On September 6th, 1937 the family's writing talent, later to emerge in the work of Sean Bourke and Desmond O'Grady, may have had its first flowering in the tentative efforts of Feathery to come to terms with his new insight into life's secrets. Appropriately enough, he chose the vehicle of verse to convey his thoughts:

*Contentment is all that I ask,
It's a blessing that wealth cannot give,
So let us endeavour the task
To practice as long as we live.*

In August, 1939, he went off on yet another sea cruise, this time taking in Naples on his trip. He came back to Limerick a few days before the Second World War broke out, and, in the words of Desmond O'Grady "never again went anywhere".

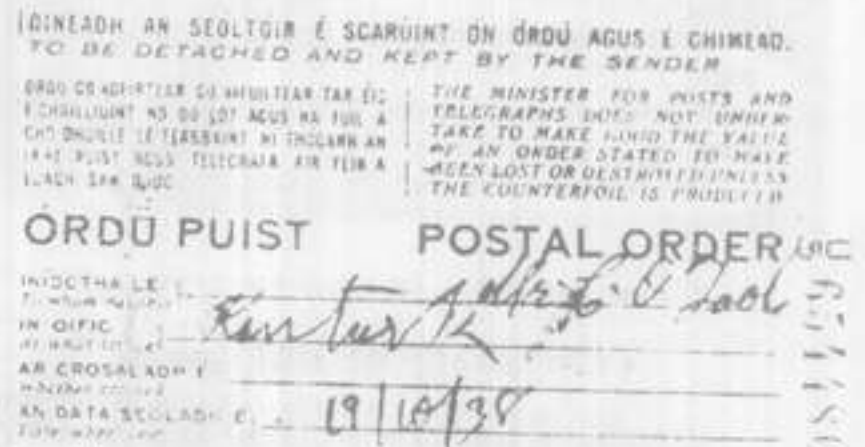
Attempting, perhaps, to take advantage of Feathery's new mood, some of his relatives made efforts to translate this attitude into more meaningful channels. These efforts were neatly summed up in a postcard sent to him by his youthful nephew, Tommy O'Grady, from Kilkee, on August 31st, 1940. The postcard, carefully selected by the boy's father, Leonard O'Grady, had as its caption: "You got a little Something the Others haven't got". On the back Tommy had written: "Mikie, Will you send me down my Sunday penny tomorrow? I want to buy ice-cream! I went swimming today, Tommy".

But Feathery's new-found bonhomie appears to have quickly evaporated in the harsh realities of the Limerick of the late thirties. He soon showed he had every intention of holding on to that "little

something the others haven't got". On October 18th, 1938, Christy O'Toole of Kanturk, Co. Cork, wrote to Feathery:

Dear Sir, Just a few lines hoping you are keeping well. Would it be too much to ask you to send me a pound, as things are very bad with me for the past few months? .. The very first chance I get to pay it back, you can be sure I won't be long.

Feathery, at this stage, must have been still effected by his post-holiday euphoria and, on the following day (October, 19th), he sent a postal order for the sum of twenty shillings to Christy O'Toole. He also carefully kept the counterfoil (shown below) until his death, thirty-five years later.



Not content with this success, O'Toole followed up with another letter:

Dear Mick, Is there any chance you could send me on a pound, as things are very blue with me at the moment? I want to go out on the bicycle to pluck some geese, as Dermot will buy them from me. He told me that he would give me 1/5 lb., for them, just to help me out, as he would not buy from anyone else. I am very sorry to be troubling you, as I owe you another pound, but I will make it up with you some day. I suppose things are not too good with yourself.

Trusting you will oblige.

Christy O'Toole scored once again, and Feathery duly sent him a second pound. However, early in the following year, when O'Toole had failed to return the money and had left for London, Feathery wrote seeking the two pounds. O'Toole's wife sent this letter to her husband in London, and, on February 9th, 1939, he replied:

Dear Michael, I received your letter from my Mrs. As regards money I will be in about Monday or Tuesday. Sorry that you are put out about it, as I could have paid you in the bank the day we met.

Continued on page 7



Feathery Bourke in an uncharacteristic pose, at Madeira in July 1937.

IN SEARCH OF

JOHN FRANCIS O'DONNELL

PART NINE

Poets have sung and said, soldiers and princes fought,

All for the sole idea that yearns from her story's page;
Iron heels have trampled and crushed it into the dust.

See how the old thought rises flashing from age to age!

(“New Year’s Eve, 1867” – J.F. O’Donnell).

A CENTENARY RE-ASSESSMENT

Uncertainty continues to cloud some areas of O’Donnell’s life. Though his death certificate clearly shows that he died on May 6th, 1874, anthologies and reference books incorrectly give this date as May 7th. The anthologies and his memorial plaque at 20 Gerald Griffin Street give 1837 as the year of his birth. However, his death certificate lists his age as 38, thus making 1836 as the date of his birth. (Searches during the course of these articles have failed to locate copies of his birth and baptismal certificates).

When the Young Ireland Society launched its campaign to provide a memorial to O’Donnell in 1905, a controversy about the exact place of the poet’s birth broke out in the Dublin and Limerick press. During an exchange of letters, Patrick Fitzgerald, 21 Richmond Street (now St. Joseph’s Street), Limerick who claimed to be O’Donnell’s “nearest relative living”, wrote a letter to the Dublin Evening Telegraph. The letter, which was reprinted in the Limerick Leader on May 29th, 1905, gave some useful information about O’Donnell’s early years.

He was born in Cornwallis Street (now Gerald Griffin Street – J.K.). His father was a painter by trade, his mother being my aunt, and he was an only child. He and I went together as boys to Leamy’s School, Hartstonge Street. His father died when he was very young. At the age of fourteen years he entered as a clerk in Mr. O’Donnell’s leather store. He showed a taste for poetry from his earliest years. He became a member of the Catholic Young Men’s Society .. he came to the notice of Dean O’Brien, who had him sent to the Diocesan College, which was then in the Crescent, to be educated .. Mr. M. MacDonagh was making inquiries about him from me ten years ago, and I gave him all the information he required at the time.

When writing about O’Donnell in 1888, however, the Limerick-born Michael Mac Donagh, despite “all the information” given to him by Patrick Fitzgerald, favoured Upper William Street as the poet’s birthplace. It is certain that O’Donnell lived in William Street in 1854, and when he began to write poems for the Limerick Reporter in that year, he gave that street as his address.

But from the information provided by Patrick Fitzgerald, and from the decision taken by the Young Ireland Society in the erection of the plaque, Gerald Griffin Street must be accepted as the poet’s

birthplace.

In his poem, Limerick Town, O’Donnell speaks of his boyhood being spent in the area around High Street and the city’s market-place, close to Gerald Griffin Street. The poem itself is a unique, if not a great work, but like many another flawed piece, it tells us more about the poet and his family background than any of his better structured more detached poems. Limerick Town is a long, rambling, descriptive poem of sight, sound and mood. Despite some idealised and sentimental verses, the poem presents a vivid and lively picture of the bustling thoroughfare in the heart of Limerick, at the middle of the nineteenth century.

O’Donnell, from a vantage position in the market-place, points across the street to a nearby house and declares:

*Come, I want a storm of gossip, pleasant
jests and ancient chat;
At that dusky doorway yonder my grandfather
smoked and sat,
Tendrils of the wind-blown clover sticking in his
broad-leafed hat.*

*There he sat and read his paper. Fancy I recall
him now!
All the shadow of the house front slanting up from
knee to brow;
Critic he of far convulsions, keen-eyed judge of
sheep and cow.*

In a further verse, O’Donnell gives a possible indication of his uncle Michael’s occupation:

*Ancient house, that held my father, all are gone
beyond recall.
There’s where Uncle Michael painted flower-pots on
the parlour wall,
There’s where Nannie, best of she-goats, munched
her pay and had her stall.*

The fact that O’Donnell was an only child, whose father died when he was very young, is also reflected in his poetry. The poet frequently and affectionately mentions his mother but seldom mentions his father. One of his rare references to his father’s origins occurs in his poem, Christmas Dreams in Canada:

*A kindly knock salutes the door,
A genial welcome answers clear
And neighbours gather on the floor –
Hooded in seasonable gear –
With greeting cries, “God bless all here”.
Gay songs are sung, bright gossip passed,
and laughters ring against the roof;
Along the hillside shrieks the blast,
But Munster thatch is tempest proof.
So speed the pleasant hours along,
Till through the lifted drifts of rain
And over barricades of cloud
The moon grows white upon the pane.*

*Oh! had I but the wings the dove
Bears winnowing through crystal air,
In one fleet ecstasy of love
I’d fly, and dream out Christmas there –
Where grey Kilmallock’s ruins run bare
Shelter my father’s, mother’s graves,
And linnets in the ivy sing –
Where the long grass declines in waves,
And daisies rarely come with spring:
One hour to kiss the sacred turf,
And pray my own to pray for me –
My people who went down in grief
To shine as saints eternally.*

One more area of confusion and disagreement exists concerning O’Donnell’s childhood. Many

writers have stated that he was educated by the Christian Brothers. Patrick Fitzgerald, however, has written that he and O’Donnell went to Leamy’s School and that the boy-poet was later sent to the Diocesan College. Again, Fitzgerald’s version seems the most authentic.

And, finally, what of O’Donnell’s merits as a poet? Of the small number of anthologists who have included O’Donnell’s poems in their collections, most have refrained from comment on the poet’s work and simply allowed his poetry to speak for itself. One of the few critics who has attempted to examine O’Donnell’s work was Geoffrey Taylor. In his anthology, Irish Poets of the Nineteenth Century, Taylor lists O’Donnell as one of the seven most important Irish poets of that century.

Introducing a selection of seventeen of O’Donnell’s poems, Taylor writes:

He was certainly a minor poet ... but he knew his place and filled it honestly .. One of the first things one notices about O’Donnell is his enormous facility – it carries him along like a wave, well beyond the right stopping-place. He probably never drew breath to consider, and seldom troubled to correct .. Another obvious thing is his versatility – Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, Browning, these were the poets he particularly liked, and he could produce very creditable poems of his own in their various manners. But the poems were his own – they were in no sense empty imitations. At that time, his compatriots, or as many of them as were writing verse, were for the most part carried away by Byron and Scott .. But the chief point about O’Donnell is his delight in natural objects, his ability to use his eyes. This is curiously rare among us .. Thomas Davis had urged contributors to The Nation, in which famous paper O’Donnell’s early poems had appeared, ‘not to live influenced by wind and sun and tree, but by the passion and deeds of the past’. But O’Donnell felt so strongly for all that Davis would have him turn from – ‘The yellow matted mignonette’, ‘The hollyhocks against the sun’, ‘The beauty of the golden moss’ – and he so wanted to get them all into his poems, that he sometimes blurs his outlines with a clutter of imagery.

It is difficult to disagree with Taylor’s judgment – as far as it goes. He does not, however, venture into that large section of O’Donnell’s work influenced “by the passion and deeds of the past” – the poet’s nationalism. Daniel Corkery, in his book, Synge And Anglo-Irish Literature, comments:

As for Irish nationalism, how can normal countries understand it? .. for such is the nature of Irish nationalism that it demands sincerity, intensity, style for its utterance, in other words, poetry.

O’Donnell had all these qualities in abundance, and he used them to maximum effect in his nationalist poetry. The results, however, have not enhanced the merits of this work. The two main influences on O’Donnell’s poetry were the Nation group of poets, or the Young Irelanders, as this group came to be known, and the English poet, Tennyson – and he seldom succeeded in reconciling these disparate traditions.

Patrick Power, who surprisingly ignores O’Donnell in his two books, The Story Of Anglo-Irish Poetry 1800 – 1922 and A History Of Anglo-Irish Literature, describes the poetry of The Nation group in the former book:

.. the whole thing rests on false and idealised history .. And it is just as true that Irishmen were just as much the cause of Ireland’s subjugation to England as any English-man! ... In Gaelic poetry of the political kind, satire and abuse was not unknown, but the writers never tried to shove their countrymen’s virtues, or alleged virtues, under the

nose of the listeners. This is what the Nation ballad-school has been guilty of — generally speaking. To sum up, the ballads of the Nation owe little to Gaelic literature, more often than not. As poetry they rest on an untruth, viz. the malignity of the English and the unqualified glory of Ireland's people and past. The Young Irelanders were sincere men who suffered for their beliefs but those who continued to write in their tradition showed up in their verse the basic untruth which was in the false premises they started off with and an unrealistic note creeps into verse which was supposed to be very realistic, indeed. The Nation tradition was generally political pamphleteering.

O'Donnell's nationalist poetry is open to all these charges. And the paradox of this section of his work is that while the subject matter of the poems was fervently Irish, it owed nothing whatever to the country's Gaelic tradition, except an artificial and sanctimonious reverence.

Most anthologists of nineteenth century poetry have not included O'Donnell in their works. But in one of the best anthologies of its kind, W.H. Auden, in his selection, *Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets*, has chosen two of Limerick writer's poems, *Limerick Town* and *By the Turnstile*, and, in the book's chronology of the century's direct history, he lists the posthumous publication of O'Donnell's Poems as the literary event of 1891.

Apart from a brief account of the poet's life and work in Robert Herbert's *Worthies Of Thomond* the only Limerick writer to review O'Donnell's work in this century was A.J. O'Halloran in his book, *The Glamour of Limerick*. O'Halloran could, perhaps, be accused of some local partiality when he wrote:

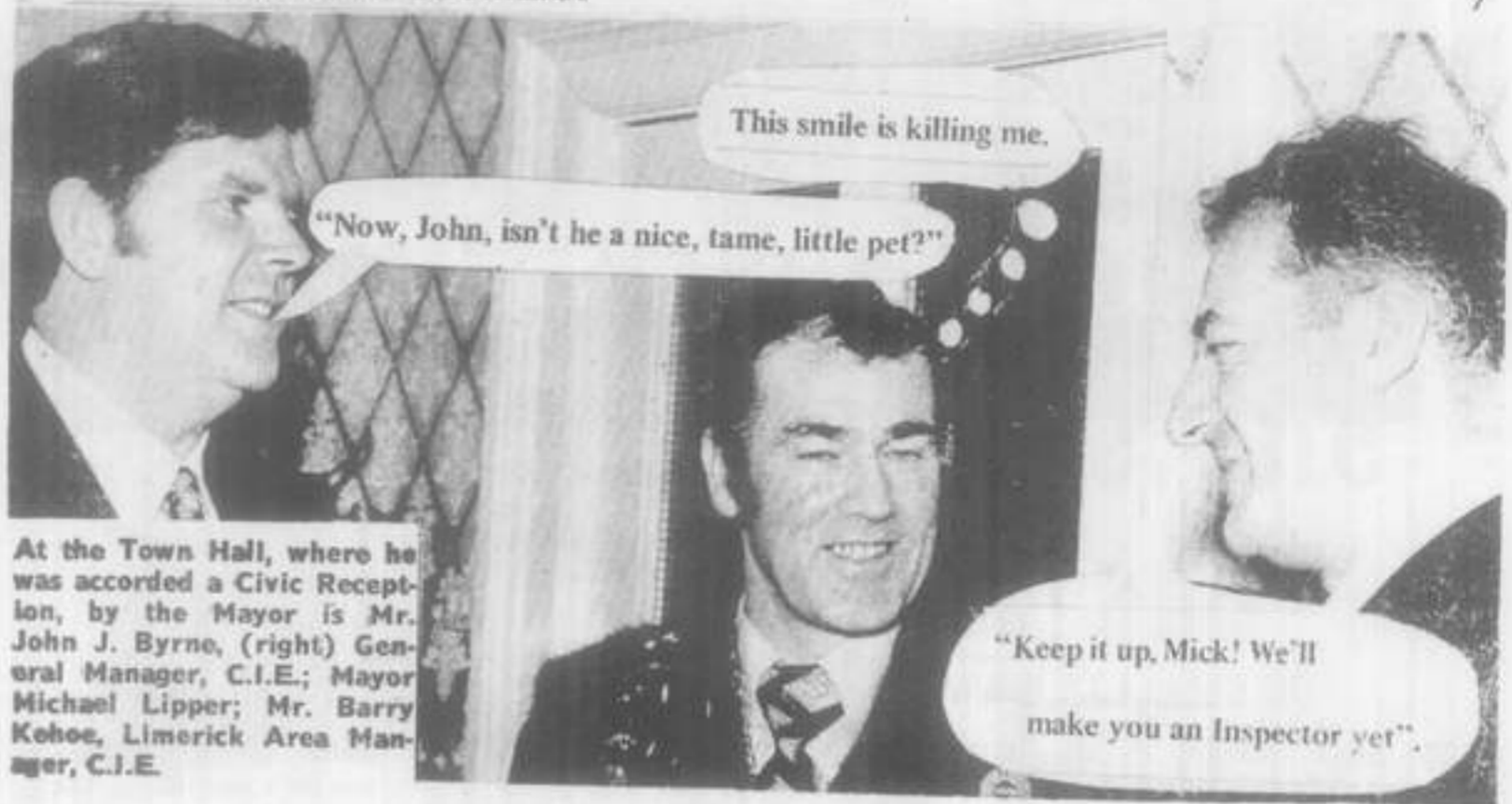
It is, perhaps, due to the fact that his poems are masterpieces of sheer artistry, and his technique almost too perfect, that he has been forgotten by the nation for whom he sang, the race from whom he drew inspiration .. thus it is that not alone in Ireland but in his home city is his poetry forgotten .. O'Donnell was not a mere versifier or rhymester stringing ephemeral jungles together, but as a poet who sang as naturally as a skylark, and, having a message to give the world, endowed his every line with pregnant thought ..

In the book of the Thomas Davis lecture series, *Irish Poets in English*, Thomas Kinsella, before his own latent nationalism spilled over into the emotional and sectarian poem, *Butcher's Dozen*, in his aptly-titled essay, *The Divided Mind*, wrote:

If we look at that poetry without sentimentality, and apply standards of poetic judgment only what remains from the nineteenth century? My own first finding .. is dullness: a huge supply of bad verse and, amid their own contributions to this supply, a few tentative achievements by Moore, Ferguson, Mangan and (I am sometimes tempted to feel) Allingham .. rhetorical fluency, savage indignation high purpose. If pure human intensity could produce great poetry it would have been done here. But it isn't enough. The strong spirit of nationalism which seems to give their work cohesion is, for poetry, just as shallow a force as Moore's desire to 'charm' his audience. A spirit of nationalism is too simple a thing to survive for long intact — or at any rate to continue being simple — in a maturing poetic career .. Waste is the distinguishing mark of all these careers .. They and all the Irish poets of the nineteenth century are in the first wave where casualties are heaviest, and they are the ruined survivors.

The simple spirit of Irish nationalism lasted for all too long, but a searching re-assessment is now in progress. Perhaps it is also time for a rescue party to set out in search of that forgotten casualty who never reached the ruined survivors — John Francis O'Donnell.

(Concluded).



At the Town Hall, where he was accorded a Civic Reception, by the Mayor is Mr. John J. Byrne, (right) General Manager, C.I.E.; Mayor Michael Lipper; Mr. Barry Kehoe, Limerick Area Manager, C.I.E.

This smile is killing me.

"Now, John, isn't he a nice, tame, little pet?"

"Keep it up, Mick! We'll

make you an Inspector yet".

The Life and Letters of Feathery Bourke

Continued from page 5

On July 22nd of the same year (1939) a few weeks before Feathery's departure on his sea-cruise to Naples, he received a letter from his brother Frank. At this time Frank was employed as a rigger and was the father of six sons, including Sean and an epileptic boy named Frankie. His brother did not mince words in laying his family's and his own position on the line for Feathery:

Mick, I am sorry to be worrying you with my troubles, as I know you have plenty of your own; but I am getting desperate and fed up with life in general. I haven't a suit of clothes to go to Mass on Sundays with, only the clothes I go to work in, and they are all full of oil and grease, with the result I don't go to Mass at all. Things are getting tough with me, although I am doing all in my power to make ends meet. Here is my expenditure for one week:

	Per week
Doctor's fees for treatment of Frankie	10-0
Insurance on children and self	10-7
Rent	7-6
Bus fare	3-0
Society A.E.U.	1-0
Household expenses for 7 days	£1.15.0
Bread, butter, dinners, etc., 5/- per day	£1.15.0
Total	£3- 7-1

I have 4 shillings left for clothes, boots, stockings, overalls, shirts, jerseys and for nine people and an occasional run to the pictures. So you can well understand the way I am fixed.

I wonder would you be humane enough to give me one of your cast-off suits of clothes to go to Mass on Sundays, or even an old coat — anything would be suitable.

I am thinking seriously of volunteering to go back in the Navy for the forthcoming war, as they are looking for men up to the age of 55. And if I do get back, I am going to remain in it until they blow me out of it.

There is one thing certain: I will have a good suit of clothes to my back and good food. Anything is better than this miserable existence.

It is not known whether or not Feathery gave his brother a cast-off suit or an old overcoat, or if he made any attempt to help the struggling family at this time.

Two months later, on September 23rd, 1939

Feathery received another letter from one of his eldest sister's sons:

Driver I/C, Finnan, A.

Sir, You told me to inform you of any moves I make. Well, as this War has broken out I have to go. At present all I know is that we go to Anson tomorrow and from there on I have not the least idea where we are going. I will let you know as soon as we get over there. Well, cheerio.

*I remain,
Yours truly,
Kevin Finnan.*

Kevin Finnan was as good as his word and, in a series of letters, he kept Feathery fully posted on his progress and movements. But the time for a direct question had come and Finnan did not beat about the bush in putting it. He again wrote to his uncle:

*Dvt. I/C Finnan, K.,
M.T. Section,
ICT Training Regt. R.A.,
Woolwich,
London, S.E. 18.*

Sir, In view of the fact that you asked me to keep in touch with you as it would be much to my advantage. I have been wondering if you meant financially? If this is so please let me know, as I have incurred many liabilities since my return here, and I would be extremely thankful for an advancement of about £10. If I am wrong in thinking that my affair with you has anything to do with finance, please let me know as soon as possible. I sincerely hope to hear from you in the near future.

*I remain,
Yours truly,
Kevin Finnan.*

It is not known whether or not Kevin Finnan got the £10, but by this time it appears that Feathery had reverted to his old self. During the war years his business prospered as the demand for scrap metal increased. And he began to grow even more remote from most of his relations.

(To be concluded).

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TALKING SHOP

ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COMPANY
CAN DO FOR YOU
BUT WHAT YOU CAN DO
FOR YOUR COMPANY

THE GREAT C.I.E. PUB-TALK

The time: 5.00 p.m. on January 22nd toward the end of a Civic Reception.

The place: The Town Hall, Rutland Street, Limerick.

The men: Alderman Michael Lipper, Mayor of Limerick, John J. Byrne, general manager C.I.E. and Barry Kehoe, Limerick area manager C.I.E.

Kehoe (to Byrne): John, could we shake off this mob and slip away for a quiet drink?

Byrne: A good idea! I was just about to say the same thing myself. What about Lipper?

Kehoe: I suppose it wouldn't do to ditch him at this stage after having set him up for this bun-fight.

Byrne: No, I suppose he could still be of some use to us. I have been told he still has six months to go as Mayor, so maybe we could get him to pull a few more strokes for the Company in this time.

Kehoe (to Lipper): Mick, I am going for a quiet drink with John Byrne, and we thought you might like to join us.

Lipper: Certainly. I'd like to have a few private words with both of you.

Kehoe: Where shall we go to?

Byrne: I used to know a nice, cosy, little place when I was here before ... What was the name of it, now ... Let me see ... I have it: Nancy Blake's.

Lipper: A good, quiet, respectable spot. Sit into my car; it's just around the corner.

Kehoe (in pub): A new car, a new suit and I see in the "Limerick Leader" that you gave £50 to the annual St. Vincent de Paul collection. Things are really looking up for you these days, Mick.

Byrne: Driving a train will be very small beer for you after all this.

Kehoe: And you'd never know, if he could get Steve Coughlan off his back he could even wind up in the Dail.

Lipper: We'll keep trying, anyway. Well, what will you have to drink?

Kehoe: I see you're still on the dry.

Lipper: I am, and I intend to stay that way for the rest of my year as Mayor. There is a shower of bums and touchers in this town and I have no intention of being an easy mark for any of them. I am finding it better — and cheaper — to keep well out of their way.

Kehoe: You're a wise man.

Byrne: Here's to your health, fellows .. Today's affair went off well. You put on a good show, Mick, fair dues to you.

Lipper: Thanks, John. You can be assured that I will always do my bit for the Company.

Kehoe: Good man, Mick. But are you trying just a little bit too hard for your own good? I know you are paying you your wages every week while you are acting as Mayor, but you need not feel under any special obligation to us. After all, you don't want to leave yourself open to attack by your political opponents for over-doing the C.I.E. publicity angle.

Byrne: What do you mean, Barry?

Kehoe: Well, I don't want to offend Mick, but after all the coverage he got out of driving the Limerick All-Ireland hurling team to Dublin, there is a story going the rounds here that Mick is taking flying lessons in the hope that he will be asked to pilot the plane taking the hurling team to America.

Byrne: Good, Barry. I'll buy that one. I must remember that story for the boys in Dublin. That's certainly one for the book. Sorry about that, Mick.

Lipper: That's alright, John. I can take an old joke.

Kehoe: I wonder what Paul Quigley and the boys at Shannon would think of it?

Lipper: That's a sore point.

Byrne: Did you know, Mick, that Aer Lingus spread some dirty stories about you around Dublin the day after you made that attack about Shannon.

Lipper: That wouldn't surprise me. Coughlan first started spreading those stories after my big vote in the 1968 by-election and he is still putting them around. Did you hear how he turned up drunk at the dinner for the hurling team and disgraced himself by shouting and roaring all over the place? He's only a bad-minded, jealous old coss.

Kehoe: Politics is a dirty racket alright. But after today's Reception and the way Mick has been hammering at the Shannon officials, someone is bound to comment on the contrast between his treatment of his own C.I.E. bosses and his attitude to the Shannon people.

Lipper: Oh, don't take all that paper talk too seriously. I didn't really mean all that Shannon stuff at all. As the two of you probably know, Tom Tobin has a bit of a chip on his shoulder about Shannon. He wrote the speeches and I just hopped the balls. I knew it would make good publicity in

the papers, and that's all part of the game as far as I'm concerned.

Byrne: You're not as slow as I thought you were, Mick. You have developed into as cute a cookie as any of them. But, nevertheless, I think Barry has a point there.

Lipper: What do you mean?

Kehoe: About these Civic Receptions. I was only in Limerick a few wet days when we arranged for you to lay on a Civic Reception for me, and now today you have given another one for John.

Lipper: I still don't follow you.

Byrne: I think I see what Barry is driving at. You're supposed to be a Labour man, Mick, and it might be hard for some people — especially workers — to reconcile your actions in giving Civic Receptions for your C.I.E. bosses, with your Party's demand for a Workers' Republic and a socialist society.

Lipper: I wouldn't take too much notice of that. The Labour Party's socialist policies are only a lot of ballsology. Surely you wouldn't call Corish, Brendan Halligan and Coughlan — no more than myself — socialists?

Kehoe: Take it easy, Mick. Don't misunderstand us, now. But can't you see you are leaving the Company and yourself open to criticism. After all, you haven't given a Civic Reception for any of your C.I.E. fellow-workers, or indeed for any other worker, for that matter.

Lipper: Alright. So I take it that you want me to give another Civic Reception for one of the lads in the job above, just to balance the record.

Byrne: I hope you will accept, Mick, that we are only out for your own good.

Kehoe: The problem now is — what worker should be picked for this honour.

Lipper: What about Jimmy Clancy, the main hall porter at the Limerick Station. He's well known and very popular.

Kehoe: I don't fancy him. He hates de Valera a bit too violently for my liking.

Byrne: I would go for Peter O'Neill, myself. He is even better known in his job as head waiter on the Sarsfield Supertrain. He is certainly a man who knows his onions.

Lipper: I don't know. The train-drivers and the busmen might be upset. I wonder would Roger Healy fill the bill? He is an intelligent and experienced chap, and he's a great family man.

Byrne: I don't know him. We need someone with a good image that the Company can make some use of.

Kehoe: What about that fellow, Pat O'Shea? Wasn't he recently appointed a Peace Commissioner?

Lipper: Pat is alright, but he is a bit too friendly with Coughlan for my liking. Who else do you think fixed him up with the Peace Commissioner's job?

Byrne: Ah, shag it. Leave it be. I'll think of something when I have more time. But, before I return to Dublin, I want to say a final word. As you know, I am presently coming under some pressure over that Wexford hotel-building blow-up and today's Reception has been useful in taking some of the heat off me.

Kehoe: Sure, we can always count on Mick to do the right thing for the Company when the chips are down.

Lipper: Don't worry about me, boys. I know the score. Barry and myself are old soccer buddies and we can still hop an old ball. Isn't that right, Barry?

Published by the Limerick Socialist Organisation